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The Rim of Hell

If every American could be induced to read Robert Scheer's pamphlet, "How the United States Got Involved in Vietnam" (Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Box 4068; Santa Barbara, Calif. 93103, sample copy free), the outlook for the future of mankind would be considerably less gloomy. Scheer shows how easy it is for a private pressure group to hoodwink most of the people of a technologically advanced, highly literate country like the United States and to impose a tyrannical regime on a small, backward, largely illiterate country like South Vietnam. All this was and is carried on under the cloak of godliness and patriotism, and ends up with the advanced country using its superior technology to devastate the small country and its neighbor to the north.

Scheer has interviewed many of the key participants in the Vietnam tragedy, including Edward Lansdale, the CIA operative and Air Force major general who is now taking a second try at persuading the Vietnamese peasantry that though Uncle Sam comes laden with napalm and high explosives, their welfare is close to his heart. The activities of William C. Bullitt, Cardinal Spellman, Joseph P. Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, Leo Cherne and a host of others are documented. Wesley Fishel, a young professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, was the first to promote Ngo Dinh Diem as the man to overturn the Geneva Agreements between the Viet Minh and the French on behalf of the Americans. He was joined by many liberals and ex-liberals. Justice William O. Douglas introduced Diem to Senators Mike Mansfield and John F. Kennedy, who were likewise impressed with his qualifications. Leo Cherne, active in the cold war as president of the International Rescue Committee, sent Joseph Buttinger, a former leader of the Social Democratic party in Austria, to set up a refugee office in South Vietnam. Lansdale introduced Buttinger to the Diem entourage in Saigon. President Eisenhower was reluctant to involve the United States deeply, but Sen.

Joe McCarthy was on his flank and Cardinal Spellman, Joseph P. Kennedy, the Luce publications and a host of other influences were brought to bear on him. Soon the crusade against the Ho Chi Minh regime and the South Vietnamese peasants was in full career, although Eisenhower conceded that 80 per cent of the South Vietnamese would have voted for union with North Vietnam had the United States and Diem allowed the election agreed upon at Geneva to be held.

A bizarre item in the subsequent hostilities is the role of Michigan State University as a cover for the CIA and in the organization of a South Vietnamese government. Fishel had left UCLA for MSU, which thereupon became a power in both South Vietnamese and American politics. Fishel asserts that for months he was the only effective contact between Ambassador Lawton Collins and Diem. After two years Fishel "surfaced," in CIA terminology, and became head of the MSU program in Vietnam, which employed fifty-four professors and 200 Vietnamese assistants to organize a South Vietnamese FBI and perform other services for the freedom-loving people. The head of the MSU School of Police Administration trained Diem's palace guard, which was supplied with guns and ammunition from the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group. "Interviews with some members of the project," Scheer writes, "revealed that involvement in a high priority program gave them a heady feeling of glamour and prestige." And good jobs.

Diem received a tremendous build-up in the United States as the savior of Vietnam, but since his only domestic support came from his co-religionists and the mandarinates, he was finally thrown aside and assassinated. The subsequent series of pseudo-governments is recent history. The late Dr. Tom Dooley, whose role in these events has been celebrated in book and movie, unknowingly summed it up when he called the 17th Parallel "the rim of Hell," with "the demons of Communism stalking outside and holding the upper half of their country in their strangling grip." Hell now blankets both North and South Vietnam, and the end is not in sight.

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